

To Touch Another by Gedry

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Summary:

Steve's never seen a three legged daemon before. A His Dark Materials inspired look at Stranger Things.

1. Chapter One

Author's Note:

Billy - Coyote - Miranda
Steve - Red Fox - Juniper
Hopper - Grizzly Bear - Bernadette
Joyce - Doe - Lyth
Dustin - Asian Small Clawed Otter - Spaz
Neil - Crab - Deak
Max - greyhound - Speck
Lucas - Squirrel - Spark
Jonathan - Buck - Thicket
Mike - Crow - Birr
Nancy - Dik-dik - Nel
Will - Magpie - Lissa
Eleven - Demogorgon - Unnamed

To Touch Another

Steve's never seen a three legged Daemon before.

Hawkins, Indiana isn't exactly a mecca for out of the box thinking. Even with the lab having opened a portal to The Upside Down. Honestly, the weirdest thing Steve has ever seen before he sees Billy Hargrove's Daemon for the first time was Hopper's Daemon, Bernadette. Having an enormous grizzly bear as a representation and extension of your soul is a pretty big statement. Bernadette fills up and conversely clears out a room.

Maybe that's why she's perfect for Hopper. For as long as Steve remembers Hopper has never really wanted to be close to anyone.

And who cuddles a grizzly?

But the daemon hovering near Billy around school has always been different. Not aloof, but almost...afraid, hesitant. Like she's expecting something bad to happen to her any second.

The worst part of it is that other than Upside Down related issues, Billy is the worst thing that's happened to Steve in this town so he's conflicted about why the three legged coyote is so interesting.

More importantly, Steve can't figure out why Juniper won't stop following every move Billy makes.

"You're staring again," Steve mutters to his daemon. "It's weird."

Juniper turns her red and white face toward him with a sharp bark that turns into a chattering whine and clamps down on Steve's wrist with her teeth before soothing the skin with her tongue.

"You're weird."

Steve rolls his eyes. Having a fox for daemon is interesting. Juniper is demanding, bossy, whiny, and sometimes aggressive. He gets bitten a lot. But she's loyal, cuddly, and oh so fluffy. And right now, when Steve's feeling more lonely than he ever has in his life, he's grateful more than he can say.

Since he and Nancy broke up Steve's been taking time to try and figure himself and his issues out. Billy Hargrove, for being as psycho as Steve is pretty sure he is, seems to be becoming a focal point of Steve's introspection.

"She stopped him," Juniper whispers as Steve realizes Billy and his coyote are watching them back.

"What?" Steve asks, distracted by the way Billy's whole posture goes taut, ridged and defensive when he sees Steve looking at him. The coyote crouches to the ground, her ears go back, she looks ready to roll over and show her belly.

There is just something so broken and odd about the pair. He can't figure it out.

"That night at the Byer's house," Juniper huffs before hopping into Steve's car as he tugs the drivers side door open. "He was hurting you, and I was biting him. I thought he wasn't going to stop and she blocked your body with her own. She snapped at his neck, Steven. She protected you."

"That makes no sense," Steve argues as he shoves his daemon over to the other side of the car and settles behind the wheel. This isn't the first time they have had this conversation and frankly Steve isn't sure why Juniper keeps trying to convince him that there is something redeemable going on in the other boy. "Why would she attack him to help me?"

Juniper huffs, clearly over the conversation, and probably Steve's

attitude as well. He deserves it, Steve knows he's being an ass about it. But there's just something there that doesn't make sense, doesn't seem right.

He has no idea how right he is.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

It's been a long time since Billy felt like he was living.

A really long time.

Survival has become more than just an idea for him. It's become a way of life. Follow the rules, keep your head down, never make another mistake like you did in California.

Billy never wants to feel pain like that again.

Doesn't think he'll survive it. Knows for sure that Miranda won't. And without her....without her...well, there's no reason to keep on living.

He's just so damn lonely and so tired of being afraid.

He can't risk any attachments. But the longing to belong somewhere is so strong he just can't seem to quit watching Harrington and that stupid fox of a daemon he has. It's just weird.

Steve Harrington does *not* like Billy. That much is obvious. And why would he? But something about the way that fox looks at him makes Billy think maybe the daemon kinda does.

How weird is that shit? Harrington really is a mess.

Billy's on pick up duty tonight. Mas and her dipshit friends hanging out at Wheeler's house. Billy's early. There are a ton of reasons why that is. But mostly, he's early because if he's quiet enough he sort of feels like he belongs for just a second. It feels good and it hurts all at the same time.

Billy's whole life is kinda like that.

Miranda snorts from where she sits by his feet, her back leaned up against Billy's jean clad legs like he's holding her up. But they both know it's the other way around. Always has been.

"What?" he whispers to her, curious about what's drawn her attention. She's so shy, so unsure of herself since....

No, not thinking about that tonight.

"They're cute," Miranda murmurs nosing in the general direction of where Harrington's fox and an otter daemon, Billy's pretty sure it belongs to Dustin, or is it Justin...Weston? Something like that, are wallowing all over the floor together in a huge pile of fur and and loud noises.

She's right, they are kinda cute. The fox, Juniper, Billy knows her

name even though he acts like he doesn't, on her back with the small otter now flopped across her stomach wiggling into her fur as they chatter at each other.

Billy wonders what it must feel like to trust someone that much. To feel that close to another person. Miranda hasn't let another daemon touch her since his mom died. He doesn't even remember if you feel anything when your daemon touches someone else's.

"They're okay," he whispers back and tries to ignore her grin. She snorts. Her weights shifts and he can just feel it, how tempted she is to go out there with them, to play. He looks up and see Harrington staring at him again. But it's warmer this time.

Seems more like a welcome that a warning. It's a welcome Billy dearly wishes he could accept. Harrington...Steve, is beautiful and Billy would love, even if it's just for a moment, to be wrapped up in his arms, to feel safe, to not be alone and desperate.

But he can't. Not now, not ever.

"Billy," Miranda whines, trying to stop him. Soothe him.

Forget it. Play the role, keep your head down, follow the rules.

He steps around her and shouts, "Get your shit Max! I'm sick of waiting on your ass!"

Then he storms off toward the car leaving his daemon to look back, longingly at the hodgepodge group of children only once before following him.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Steve's been running so long his legs are screaming, his back feels like it's been branded, his feet are totally numb.

Everything just went to shit so quickly.

He's stumbling over roots and can feel branches and twigs whipping the skin off his face.

But none of that matters. He can't stop.

If he stops...if stops Billy dies.

Who knew a coyote would be so heavy. "How did you get so far from him?" Steve gasps as he dodges another attack, another demodog coming from his left. His shoulder is bleeding too much. Miranda's jaw snapped and locked tight around his bones. She's terrified and he's breaking all the rules.

You never touch someone's daemon without their consent. But she's too far from Billy, too weak from saving Steve from those monsters to be able to make it back alone and he just couldn't leave her to die even as she snarled at him to "GO!" So he had grabbed her, pleading little apologies as he had felt her stiffen in his arms, whispering

forgiveness when she yowled and attacked him.

She's scared. They're both so scared right now.

"Here!" Juniper screams and Steve has never been so grateful for her speed or the loudness of her voice. Billy is slumped over a stump, bleeding from his head, pale and shaking. Steve's not sure how much of that is the injury or Steve touching Miranda.

"Billy," He snaps as he skids to halt next to the other boys form. "You have to get up! We have to go now."

Even as he says it, Steve knows it's too late. Billy's groggy, Steve's lungs are bursting, they're both injured. Juniper screams bloody murder and raises what looks like every hair on her body as three demodogs slip from the woods into the clearing and surround them.

Steve doesn't want to die out here like this. But he'll be damned if he going down without a fight. He crouches down long enough to tuck Miranda's shaking form next to Billy's side and snarls back at them as one of them opens their flower pelt looking mouth and howls. Steve's got no plan. No escape route. But he plants his feet and readies for the attack.

They run toward him in one solid leap and he screams, keeping his body between Billy and the attackers. But right when he thinks they should have reached him, right about the time his relatively short life starts to flash before his eyes two of them are tackled from the left by a fully grown demogorgon and slashed to bits. The one remaining demodog turns to run only to have it's neck clamped down on by

massive bear jaws and snapped with one vicious twist of Bernadette's head.

"You okay?" The grizzly questions after she drops the body to the ground. "Did we get here in time?"

Steve nods. He can't breathe. Everything is blurry. He slides down next to Billy and closes his eyes only to snap them back open again after he feels a damp tongue touch his cheek. Miranda looks into his eyes before bumping his cheek in the same place she licked him. Then the coyote turns back to Billy who slumps over, unconscious, into Steve's lap.

They stay like that. Steve struggling for breath surrounded by a fox and three legged coyote on the forest floor while a bear and demogorgon circle them and keep watch until Hopper comes roaring into the clearing with Eleven close behind. He swings his gun toward the demogorgon with a snarl until El grabs the barrel and states, "Mine."

Steve wishes Jonathan were here. The look on Hoppers face is priceless. "You can't be serious," Hopper manages to choke out. "You don't have a daemon."

"Do now," Eleven answers with a tilt of her head. "Always did. Just stuck in the upside down."

Steve watches her reach up and pet the hideous thing and smiles as it rubs all over her like a cat that's missed its owner. Steve notices, now that he's paying attention, how scarred it is compared to all the

others he's seen. Like it's been fighting it's whole life.

Maybe it has.

She smiles and hugs it to her. Steve's heart warms because Eleven deserves to be happy more than anyone he has ever met. If this ugly ass daemon makes her happy then so be it. They will figure it out.

Hopper still looks dumbstruck. "What the fuck are we gonna do with that?" He questions to no one in particular.

Bernadette throws her head back and laughs.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

It takes them a week to get it all under control.

A week full of running, screaming, gore, and no sleep. The kids are ready to fall down, hell, they're all ready to fall down. Will's already asleep in the corner of Hoppers cabin tucked up next to Jonathan's buck drooling into his fur.

Steve just wants a shower, like a shower that lasts a million years, and to sleep for a week. Thank God it's the summer. No school for the kids to worry about.

And he's been working for Hopper since graduation so he's pretty sure he still has a job.

"We need to get everyone home," Hopper sighs as he looks around their rag-tag group. "Nancy and Mike are covered, so are Jonathan and Will. So it's just Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Billy we have to worry about."

"Lucas and Dustin have told their parents they're sleeping over at each others houses," Steve offers.

"Is that going to work?" Hopper questions with a raised eyebrow. "That's a long time."

Steve shrugs, "They don't talk to each other so I think we're fine."

"Ok," Hopper nods as he gets to his feet, "Just Billy and Max then, Come on, let's go."

It's clear he's dreading what is going to have to be some very delicate lying. Steve thinks, not for the first time, that it will be easier when EJ can come out of hiding and they'll have some kind of excuse for Max to be at a friends house. He's so caught up in the thought that it takes Steve almost as long as Hopper to realize that Billy and Max haven't moved.

“Billy can’t go home,” Max says. The words sound like they are being drug out of her against her will.

“Max!” the sound of her name is sharp, a warning. But not from Billy, it’s Miranda who speaks. “Enough!”

Max shakes her head and tears well up and spill down her cheeks. “No.” She turns back to Hopper and the rest of the group. “Billy can’t go home. His dad won’t believe you. He’ll hurt him again.”

Billy barely moves from where he’s leaned up against the wall with his arms crossed and his knees pulled up, “Leave it, Max. You’re wrong. She’s wrong. Dad doesn’t hurt me.”

But he doesn’t get up, Doesn’t move toward the door and Steve can’t stop staring. Because it’s starting to make sense now. This horrible thought in his head that he doesn’t want to believe, doesn’t want to voice.

“Bullshit!” Max snarls in his direction before turning to Joyce and Hopper and pleading, “Please. He’s lying. Before, in California, I made a mistake and his dad tortured him so bad Billy had to go to the hospital. He was screaming. I heard him. For hours. I thought Billy was going to die, Neil hurt him so bad.”

“He never laid a finger on me,” Billy grinds out through clenched teeth.

“Why are you lying?!” Max screams. “Why won’t you let them help you!?”

“He’s not,” Steve answers. Watching as Billy turns wide eyes to him, pleading, for something. “It’s Miranda, isn’t it?” When he gets no response Steve takes a breath to steady his nerves and swallows what feels like bile crawling up from his stomach. “He touches Miranda, doesn’t he? That’s why she’s missing her leg. He hurts her so that he can hurt you without leaving a mark.”

Billy lets out a dry sob and buries his head in his arms. Miranda whines, high and sad before slipping onto the ground at his feet into a heap. It’s horrible. The most heinous thing any of them can think

of. You never touch someone else's daemon, not in anger, not without consent. The air around them crackles with energy.

The whole cabin shudders on it's foundation.

"Like PAPA," EJ roars. Her yell echoed in the scream from her daemon outside. The door flies open and she slams her way out of the cabin, grabbing onto the shoulder of her rediscovered demogorgon daemon and swinging up onto its back before they go tearing away through the woods.

"Oh my God," Joyce is up and grabbing the gun from Nancy before yanking open the driver's side door of Hopper's jeep and yelling to Jonathan, "Get the kids home. Steve, take Billy to your place. Max stays with Nancy." She turns to Hopper then, "What are you waiting for?! We have to go *NOW!!!*"

Hopper seems to shake himself awake, by then Joyce is already driving off without him, her daemon running along side. Bernadette lumbers to the edge of the porch and lowers her shoulder for Hopper to swing up on her back. They run after the jeep.

Steve waits for Nancy to drive off in his car with Max and Mike. Waits for Jonathan to load the other boys in his car and leave as well. Waits for the sun to start going down before he is able to unclench the hand he has in Junipers fur. Once he does he sits, unmoving, as she crawls on her belly across the floor to Billy, whimpering, chattering her distress, their distress. He feels like his heart is beating it's way out of his chest.

But then Juniper's nose brushes Billy's arm and the other boy unfolds, so slowly, before reaching out trembling fingers to brush through the foxes hair. Steve feels like he's suddenly out in the sun. So warm. So good.

His eyes slide closed just before Billy wraps his arms around Juniper and pulls her close with a stifled sob.

Steve feels the world slip away.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Billy's eyes feel like they're on fire. Jesus, he hasn't cried so much since.....since his fucking father did what he did to Miranda. Fuck, Billy still can't think about it. Sure as hell can't say it out loud. But he can at least admit it to himself that it happened now.

He can stop hiding.

No idea how Steve figured it out.

Billy drove them to Steve's. Would have taken them all back to the huge house that belongs to his parents if the fox....no.....her name is Juniper. He's going to call her by her name. She told him to. Said he was allowed, that it was important while he clung to her and Miranda and cried like some fucked up baby. So instead they end up at what Juniper informs him was Hopper's old trailer before Eleven came. Gifted to Steve when his parents had somewhat politely asked him to leave.

Billy had given her an earful after thinking it was going to take an act of God to get Steve from the cabin to his car. But the other boy weighed way less than Billy had expected. Juniper informing Billy tightly that her human had not been sleeping well nor eating much for months. And ain't that a fucking kick in the gut? King Steve, hungry, homeless, and rocked with nightmares. It hits a little too close to home and Billy feels kinda bad for not being more careful getting his unconscious body out of the car and hitting his head on the door.

Shit happens.

“He’s waking up,” Juniper announces like Billy can’t fucking see the other boy moving on the couch.

Steve groans like he’s dying; reaches up to rub at his face and then snaps wide eyes open searching for where he is, what’s happened.

“This place is a shit hole,” Billy announces from where he’s been sitting on the floor across from the couch keeping watch.

Steve grins, slow and easy, like they’re friends. Maybe they are now? Who knows. “Yeah,” he murmurs, all sleepy and deep and Billy’s suddenly aware of why Miranda’s been watching Steve so closely. Fuck. “It is ugly, but it’s mine.”

And yeah, having a little place in world that’s just his would be something Billy was proud as fuck of too. He glares at his daemon from the corner of his eye while Steve stretches. So much for the daemon/human bond. The least Miranda could have done it clue him in he had the hots for Steven Harrington. Why is she always to the first to notice?

“You okay?” Steve asks as he pulls himself into a seated position like everything in his body is hurting.

Billy snorts. "I don't know," is all he can come up with. "Do you think they killed him?"

Steve's silent for a while, like he's considering the options, and that's hot and kinda scary as fuck too. "Maybe?" he finally offers as an answer. "It wouldn't be the first time a bad guy died around here."

And yeah, that so was *not* the answer Billy was expecting. Steve's swiping a hand across his eyes like he's too old for this shit and Billy kinda maybe thinks he knows exactly how Steve feels right now. "What am I supposed to do now?" Billy asks when Steve drags himself to his feet and stretches. He's totally ignoring that little bit of stomach he sees when Steve's shirt rides up. What the fuck is wrong with him right now? He's basically homeless, some psychic kid may be out there murdering his dad, and Billy's got boner for the guy that ratted out his dirty family secret. Fuck, Steve's looking at him like Billy's been staring off into space too long.

"This way," Steve huffs as he turns and heads down the hall. "Kitchen's on the left, bathroom's on the right, your room is two doors down on the left."

"My room?" Billy asks as he struggles to his feet and follows.

"Yeah," Steve shrugs. "Welcome to *our* shithole. Rent is due on the first, don't worry. I got it covered this month, you got a lot going on. No loud parties, no chick of the week here every night. I work a lot, I have bad fucking dreams, and I can't cook worth shit. Do your own laundry, keep your piss inside the toilet and not down the side. Those are the rules. You good?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, just steps into one of the unnamed rooms and shuts the door behind him with a groan. Billy figures it must be Steve's bedroom.

Is he good?

Billy looks at Miranda with the first genuine smile he's had since California.

He's fucking amazing.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Steve's getting used to this new routine.

Not being alone in general is actually really cool. He's been alone most of his life and honestly doesn't have much experience sharing his space with anyone, not even his parents, much less someone his own age.

But having Billy around has been.....annoying, frustrating, irritating, agonizing, enlightening, enjoyable, awesome.

Steve's got some conflicting feelings related to the whole thing but it's mostly because Billy blows like the wind most of the time and it's hard for Steve to figure out what mood his roommate is going to be in from minute to minute.

For instance, Billy loves to cook. He's made it his personal mission to keep Steve fed. And not just peanut butter, we're talking full on meals with vegetables and shit. It's great.

But he hates doing the dishes and bitches the *whole time* he's washing them about how little Steve helps out around the trailer. Then when Steve tries to help Billy yells at him to "SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN." Steve has no clue that the fuck is going on.

Billy washes clothes but won't fold them and gets mad when Steve does.

Billy scrubs the bathroom with a toothbrush until it's gleaming and cleaner than Steve has ever remembered ever seeing a bathroom. But it's Steve's toothbrush.

Billy straightens up Steve's bedroom, even though Steve *expressly* told him to stay out of there, and THEN he makes fun of Steve's porn collection.

But now it's missing and Billy won't give it back.

Even the gay porn.

Maybe....especially the gay porn.

Steve's not asking.

Billy brushes Juniper and feeds her all of her favorite foods.

He refuses to let Steve anywhere near Miranda. Ever.

Billy wakes up when Steve screams his way out of his nightmares three times a week, follows him to the bathroom and hold Steve's

hair back while he vomits. Then he cleans Steve up while he shakes and sweats and puts him back to bed, holds him in the dark, sings him back to sleep.

Acts like it never happens in the morning.

Billy wakes up crying a couple of nights per week. When Steve goes to comfort him Billy screams through the door “LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!”

Steve wants to hold him so damn bad.

Billy gets a job to help out with the rent and when he notices Steve is lonely being home by himself again he changes his schedule so they can carpool and hang out together when they're off.

Billy packs Steve a lunch with his favorite snacks every day.

He paid for all the groceries.

He detailed Steve's car.

Billy *touches* Steve sometimes, just casually, in passing, and it's like belonging and acceptance, and everything Steve has been missing in his life.

Billy still flinches when Steve reaches back.

It's good. Altogether speaking, it's better than Steve could have asked for.

So, of course, he has to fuck it up.

They've had a good week. Bills are paid, fridge is full, they got to take the kids to the arcade *and* a movie. Steve's basking in his good parent feelings on their crappy sofa when he feels a wet nose nuzzle the skin on his arm sticking out from under his t-shirt. He reaches up to ruffle Junipers coat with a grin but when he makes contact it's obvious from the texture of the fur, and the broken gasp from the chair across the room, that this is not his fox.

"Miranda?" Steve questions as he opens his eyes to see the coyote daemon staring at him, so close she's almost in his lap.

"Don't," Billy warns. There's no give in his tone. If Steve does this, there's gonna be a fight. It doesn't matter that Miranda technically started it.

Billy and Miranda don't always seem to see eye to eye.

His hand hovers over her head for what feels like minutes. Miranda staring at him, Steve staring at Billy, Billy glaring from across the room. Then she whines, this tiny broken, lonely sound, and Steve cracks. He does more than pet her, he wraps both his arms around

her and tugs her full on into his lap.

Billy lets out a sharp gasp of something that sounds like pain before Steve watches his eyes close and his body seem to melt into the chair. Miranda whimpers and tucks her face into Steve's armpit while Steve works his fingers through her soft, beautiful fur and hums a nameless tune. They stay like that for a long time before Miranda whispers "the last person that touched me with kindness was his mother. She died a long time ago."

It's stupid, Steve cries, hot tears leaking down his face, for Miranda, for Billy, maybe even for him. Because he's messed this up now. Billy might leave. He's scared. Juniper cuddles in tight to his side and Steve holds Miranda tighter, knowing this might be the only time.

Billy storms out of the house later. Steve doesn't see him for a week and he's barely functional. Hopper sends him home on the third day and refuses to let him come back until he's not half dead.

"Billy!" Steve blurts when his wayward roommate slams back into the house after seven days. Billy glares at him hard for a long time and then bashes his way through the trailer the whole time snapping, "Look at this fucking place! You are hopeless on your own. What the fuck would you do without me? Did have a fucking party to mess our house up this bad? This isn't going to fly, Steven. I live here too and you're going to have to try harder to pick this place up. Christ, one week and it looks like a demodog exploded in the kitchen. Did you even eat anything? Have you showered? You look like shit. I deserve more respect for how hard I work around here. You'd fucking starve without me. I hope you know that." The whole while he's stomping around the trailer picking up trash and dirty dishes. Steve so happy he could cry.

Hell, he is crying. Just a little. Billy pauses in his tirade directly in front of Steve and leans forward, pressing their foreheads together and taking a shaky breath. "I missed you," Steve whimpers. "So much. I'm sorry."

Billy smirks, rubs their noses together, and asks, "Can I kiss you, Baby?"

Steve kisses him first.

Billy clings to him like he's a lifeline. Moans into Steve's mouth like he's the best thing ever.

Then tells Steve he's doing it wrong.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Billy kisses like sin on a stick. He knows it too. It's a skill. One he's damn proud of.

He knows Steve thinks he does it to mess with him, but the truth is, Billy isn't really sure how to get affection any other way. So kissing Steve until the other boy is a trembling mess against him is like the best thing ever for Billy.

It's the rest of the whole relationship thing he can't really figure out. And clearly, Steve wants him to figure it out. Billy not figuring it out is starting to cause problems.

For instance, Steve keeps trying to hug him. He reached out once to hold Billy's hand when they were watching a movie. And that whole thing was weird enough because Steve used to sit on the recliner and Billy used to sit on the couch. Now they are both sitting on the couch together.....at the same time.....and it's weird. Well, at least it's weird to Billy. Steve ends up giving him puppy dog eyes most nights or shrugging off Billy's kisses to huff and disappear into his room early leaving Juniper and Miranda looking at Billy like he's a total idiot.

Billy's honest, he's a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them. He needs some help here and asking someone outside of this trailer is not fucking going to happen. So that leaves Steve and that's going to suck. But....

"I'm fucking this all up aren't I?" Billy blurts out as they sit in the kitchen and drink coffee. "I know I am. I'm not sure how. I don't want to."

It all kind of comes out in a rush. He's nervous.

"It's fine," Steve says slowly, the words drug out like taffy. It's bullshit. Billy is clear on how much Steve hates bullshit.

"It's not," Billy shakes his head. "I want to be good at this."

Steve gives him a really long blink as a reply and the silence stretches between them. "Why?" Steve finally questions.

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to be good at this?"

Billy bites the inside of his cheek to keep from making a shitty reply. Uncomfortable was never where he thrived and he's really uncomfortable now. "What difference does it make?"

Steve's face turns red, his jaw clenches, he slams the coffee cup down and looks like he's ready to get up and walk away. But it's Juniper that Billy pays attention to. She's reached up and slapped her front paw on Billy's denim clad thigh. "Steve thinks you just want to be good at everything. He's insecure, never feels good enough, doesn't

have an anchor and he wants you to be that but you keep rejecting him, rejecting us.”

Billy’s shocked, for once, into silence.

Miranda’s quiet “No we aren’t.” Makes Billy’s heart aches as much as the sudden tears he sees welling up in Steve’s eyes.

“I’m not,” Billy manages to choke out past the stupid huge lump in his throat. “I’m not rejecting you. I’m not trying to. I swear. I just...I don’t know what you want.”

Steve blinks, a few fat teardrops sliding down his red cheeks. “I want to touch you.”

“But you do!” Billy gasps, “You touch me a lot.”

“And every time you act like I just fired a gun at you,” Steve huffs. “I’m not going to hurt you, Billy.”

And...yeah. Billy has no answer for that. In his experience, love has always ended in pain.

“You will,” Miranda answers. Steve looks stunned, like hit by a bus stunned. “You’re going to hurt us. Everyone who ever said they loved us has hurt us. By leaving, by punching, or twisting, or burning. That’s just what love is.”

Billy stares at the floor so hard he's trying to burn a hole in it with just his gaze. "I'm fucked up," he whispers. "I know. I'm good as a punching bag. I'm a good kisser. A good fuck. You don't know that yet, but it's true. I'm not good for the rest of it. All that hand holding crap. The soft stuff. I don't know how to do that. Not for real. Not...like it matters."

Steve chews his bottom lip for a long moment before standing up and offering Billy his hand. "Do you maybe want to learn...if you're good at it. The soft stuff. When it matters? With me?"

Billy hesitates. He wants to so damn bad. Wants to have someone to lean on. Wants that someone to be Steve. His fingers twitch.

"I'm a good teacher," Steve assures him. "I suck at school work and I can't pay attention half the time. But this. I'm a master at cuddling. Trust me?"

And he sounds so hopeful. What's the point of being here if you can't hope for change? Billy could have stayed at home and let his father beat him to death if he didn't want his life to be full of hope.

So he takes Steve's hand and finds himself about ten minutes later held, warm and safe against Steve's chest. Their legs tangled together on the couch, Steve's hand scratching at Billy's scalp so he doesn't mess up Billy's curls. "You're amazing," he breathes out against the soft material of Steve's worn t-shirt.

Steve chuckles, “No I’m not.” It sounds sad.

“Trust me?” Billy responds. He feels Steve’s breath hitch in his chest. “You are to me. Amazing. Start to believe it.”

Steve presses a kiss to his forehead and Billy answers with “I love you.”

The next morning, before Steve leaves for work, Billy kisses him goodbye on the cheek and hugs him tight. He whispers as he watches Steve’s car drive off, “I love you, too.”